

## Title of Session

Insight into Impact – the Employability of Qualifiers Survey: Exploring the added value of part-time distance learning study

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## Conference Theme

C1. Innovation

## Session Type

Paper

## Key words

Impact, Employability, Survey

## Session Abstract

The recognition of different forms of learning to maximise development of employability across a range of societal groups is crucial for economic progress. Part-time and distance learning study has historically been included with generic measures of Higher Education (HE) impact, such as the Destination of Leavers from HE survey. This has left gaps in understanding, by focussing on career and immediate transitions, and omitting the areas of skills development, learning gains and personal goals.

Work to develop the understanding of the employability benefits of study at the Open University (OU), and to include areas not covered by existing surveys, has focussed on the creation of the Employability of Qualifiers Survey. This survey gathers data on both careers and personal goals, employability skills, reflections on studying at the OU, as well as feedback on careers service provision.

Features of the survey include:

- An online questionnaire, with telephone reminders and interviews.
- A benchmark comparison group to provide context to the OU data.
- The development of an interactive data dashboard. Academic colleagues have been encouraged to make use of the data in their TEF submissions via this dashboard.

Following a pilot in 2015, the survey now runs annually and has two years of results to begin collating into useful trend data. The data have also been used by an OU strategic programme, Enhancing Employability and Career Progression, and informs one of the university's strategic key performance indicators.

**This session** will set out in more detail:

- An overview of the methodology used.
- Details of the survey, including the questionnaire and benchmark group.
- Lessons learned and how the survey is evolving.
- Illustrations of how the results have been used across the university to inform service planning and evidence employability progression.

## Session Paper

### Introduction

The recognition of different forms of learning to maximise development of employability across a range of societal groups is crucial for economic progress. Part-time and distance learning study has historically been included with generic measures of Higher Education impact, such as the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE).

The DLHE and its replacement the new Graduate Outcomes (GO) survey, are primarily focused on the core Higher Education population of those 18-21 year old straight-from-school, full-time students who are graduating and transitioning into another activity such as employment or study. We know that 76% of Open University (OU) students are already in employment, and that only 34% of new OU undergraduates are under 25 years old<sup>1</sup>. Essentially the DLHE and GO are first destination surveys and as such are more suitable for career starters rather than career changers or developers, as they fail to adequately capture progression. A second limitation is that it is conducted close to graduation (the DLHE was 6 months, GO is 15 months), meaning that many OU leavers will not have had the time to achieve their career aims. This has left gaps in understanding, by focussing on career and immediate transitions, and omitting the areas of motivations, skills development, learning gain and personal goals of the individual.

At the OU, employability is understood to be “A set of achievements and personal attributes that support individuals in developing their careers, raising their aspirations and enabling students to further their contribution to society.” Work to develop the understanding of the employability benefits of study at the OU, and to include areas not covered by existing surveys, has focussed on the creation of the Employability of Qualifiers Survey (EQS). This survey gathers data on both careers and personal goals, employability skills, reflections on studying at the OU, as well as feedback on careers service provision.

To date, three surveys have been conducted – a pilot in 2015, and surveys in 2017 and 2018.

### Overview of methodology

The pilot EQS was conducted in 2015, led by Careers and Employability Services (CES). An EQS stakeholder and advisory group, drawn from colleagues across the university, was formed to assist this pilot. This group met to advise and oversee the running of the survey, and to ensure the wider views of colleagues across the OU were included.

The questionnaire was sent to 50,000 alumni from three cohorts – those who had achieved qualifications two, three and four years previously. An 18% response rate was achieved. The results proved insightful and the decision was made to mainstream the survey as a key means of monitoring and informing future careers and employability provision, including service design and positioning, as well as evaluating the impact of OU study via the student’s perception of their own employability, skills gained and perceived value of OU study through robust survey metrics.

Moving forward, it was decided to conduct the survey on an annual basis, with one cohort of students per survey approximately three years after qualifying. It was felt that a three-year period post qualification allowed those OU students who were already working time to reflect and act on the impact from their studies, as well as recognise the added value towards broader goals relating to personal and social development. Therefore the 2017 survey was distributed to students who achieved an OU qualification in 2013/14 and the 2018 survey to students who achieved in 2014/15.

Students achieving from all qualifications were surveyed, including certificates, diplomas, foundation degrees, first degrees, masters and research degrees. Students who were currently studying at the OU at the time of the survey were removed, leaving a survey population over 19,000 alumni for the 2017 survey and 18,000 alumni for the 2018 survey. The questionnaire was kept similar to the pilot questionnaire, with some minor amendments.

All three surveys were incentivised with the offer of a prize draw (10 prizes of £25 Amazon vouchers per survey).

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy-and-policies/facts-and-figures>

A research agency was procured, on a three-year contract, to conduct the fieldwork and the initial analysis of the results. An online questionnaire (with several email and text reminders) was used, with telephone reminders and interviews to boost response rates. The survey was open for 4 weeks.

For the 2017 and 2018 surveys, a benchmark comparison group survey was conducted at the same time to provide some context to the OU data. Alumni who achieved a qualification in the same academic year from other institutions were sourced from a specialist education panel. These alumni were asked the same questions as the OU alumni via an online questionnaire. This comparison group were not necessarily part time students nor distance learners, but were the nearest comparison group available.

### Questionnaire

The EQS questionnaire built on the questions asked in the DLHE survey (on employment and further study) but also included questions on:

- Impact of OU study  
For example, ‘My experience at the OU has helped me to get where I am today’ and ‘Overall, how satisfied are you with your experience at the OU?’
- Achievement of goals  
For example, ‘Overall, would you agree that studying with the OU has/will help you achieve your career goals?’
- Motivations  
For example, ‘Thinking back to your aims and goals at the time of starting your studies at the OU, which of the following best describes you at that time’ and ‘How important was the earning potential of your chosen course from the OU when deciding where to study?’
- Impact on career progression (for those in employment only)  
For example, ‘What kind of career progression have you experienced as a result of your study at the OU?’
- Skills development  
For example, ‘How well did your overall experience with the OU help you to further develop self-management?’
- Feedback on careers services  
For example, ‘Which of the following best describes your knowledge and use of the OU Careers Service?’ and ‘Overall, how satisfied are you with the OU Careers Service?’

Most questions were closed, using Likert scales (for example, agree/disagree, satisfied/dissatisfied). A small number of open questions were included to qualify answers to earlier questions, so ‘Why is this?’ was asked after ‘Overall, would you agree that studying with the OU has/will help you achieve your career goals?’

### Response rates

The responses rates to the 2017 and 2018 surveys were 18% (the same as the pilot), so just under 3,500 and 3,000 responses respectively. In comparison the benchmark survey received 200 and 201 responses to the 2017 and 2018 surveys respectively. These numbers are low as these students are expensive to reach. The results were caveated to reflect these small benchmark numbers.

Demographic comparisons of the OU respondents to the OU survey populations found good representation across the characteristics of sex, age, disability and nation for both surveys. This was closely monitored during the fieldwork to ensure all groups were represented.

### Context

It is worth noting the study context for these survey respondents. These alumni were students some time ago, they achieved their qualifications three years previously and so had started their studies some time before this – for example, studying at 60 credits per year (0.5 student FTE) takes six years to complete a first degree. Very different funding arrangements and student support mechanisms would have been in place. A frequent criticism is that there is a long time delay to the data, that this is not real-time data. However, as mentioned earlier, a three-year period post qualification allows students time to gather impact and the added value from their studies.

The use of the benchmark comparison group has been a particular strength and is a definite feature of future surveys. The benchmark data, comparing responses from OU alumni to responses from alumni from other Higher Education Institutions, has enabled us to contextualise OU performance. The surveys found that career motivation was reported by more benchmark alumni (80%) than OU alumni (59%). This difference was more marked between those who categorised themselves as career starters – 7% of the OU respondents in this

category compared to 60% of the benchmark respondents. More OU alumni (40%) reported studying for “other purposes” (for example, for general interest) than benchmark alumni (14%). These are perhaps reflections of the differences in the age profile between the two groups – the benchmark group were much younger, with over 80% aged 16-34 years old compared to less than 20% of OU alumni. We have also confirmed that earning potential was more important for the benchmark alumni (55%) than for the OU alumni (34%), and that personal development was the converse – more important for OU respondents (77%) when compared to the benchmark respondents (68%). These data provide a deeper perspective and context when considering Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) salary data and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) metrics, illustrating that perceived benefit for students is not solely based on salary.

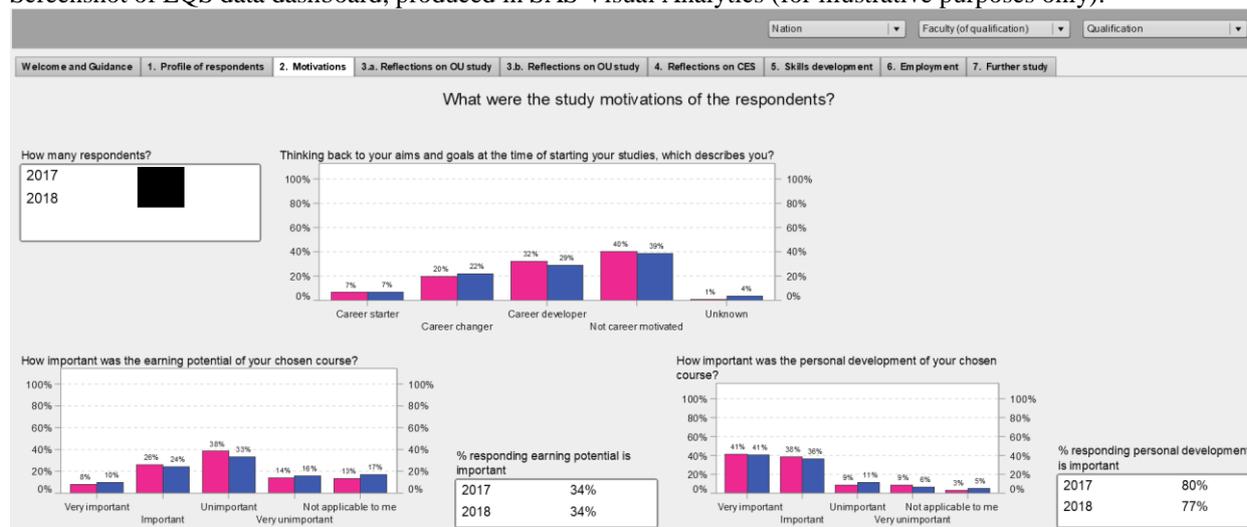
**Turning insights into impact**

This survey has enabled us to begin building up a database of knowledge on employability metrics. We have two years of results and with results from the 2019 survey, where fieldwork is planned for October 2019, we can begin to conduct some trend analyses.

Initial analyses from the surveys were disseminated to a wide range of colleagues across the OU. These analyses detailed the results in a brief word document, a more detailed PowerPoint summary and an excel data file (showing breakdowns by nation, faculty and employability cohort). These documents were made accessible via an OU SharePoint site.

Further developments were an interactive data dashboard, which is filterable by nation, faculty and qualification. This dashboard shows more detailed data, for example destination data on job titles and employer names, in addition to the key headlines on motivations, reflections on OU study, reflections on CES, employment and further study. The dashboard presents this data and compares the 2017 and 2018 results through visualisations.

Screenshot of EQS data dashboard, produced in SAS Visual Analytics (for illustrative purposes only):



This dashboard provides all staff across the OU access to more detailed data, with the ability to self-serve. Academic colleagues have made use of the data in their TEF submissions via this dashboard, to add more context to the already established TEF employability metrics. For example, colleagues writing their subject level submissions used data from the career goals questions and the skills development questions in their commentaries.

**Informing strategy** – The data has also been used by an OU strategic programme which focuses on employability and career progression. The results from two questions (achievement of career goals and achievement of personal goals) are currently being used as two of the programme’s key performance indicators. In fact the data informs one of the university’s strategic key performance indicators, and so OU senior management are aware of and are tracking the data from this survey.

Staff in CES and the strategic programme have discussed the findings in detail, through their governance and steering groups, to enable a better understanding of the uniqueness of employability for OU students in order to steer direction of the strategic objective and delivery of services to students.

Within CES there have been multiple uses of the data – in work with students, with colleagues, with employers and with the management team. The CES management team has used the data to assist in the planning and prioritisation of careers services to students and colleagues. For example, the survey revealed OU alumni have a much lower awareness of the OU careers service when compared to the awareness of benchmark respondents (a 40 percentage point difference). This informed part of the development of a new CES Marketing and Communications strategy to raise awareness directly with students and the trialling of new strategies of engaging with alumni, including the attendance of careers colleagues at degree ceremonies.

**Student-facing work** – In careers consultations with students, the EQS results have most often been used to provide students with data on the destinations of other students. One CES consultant has commented that the data is particularly useful for the ‘tricky’ qualifications where there are not obvious ‘solid’ career progression routes, for example, design and innovation, childhood and youth studies. Specific examples include the supporting of a student who was concerned about how their disability might hinder them in work. The CES consultant used EQS data to show examples of the types of employment graduates with a disability who had studied their subject went into. Another example centres on a student who would not part with their money to register for their next module until they heard the job titles of what students were doing with their qualification. They needed convincing that OU graduates were getting jobs and wanted “hard evidence” of where OU students were working. In the absence of DLHE or GO data (the current transition between the DLHE and GO surveys leaves a gap in datasets), the EQS was able to provide that information.

**Supporting OU colleagues** – Work with OU colleagues has involved the use of EQS data by subject at Boards of Study meetings to illustrate destinations of graduates in specific subject areas. One colleague received a request from a faculty Head of Student Support after one of the quarterly operations meetings. The request was to provide Student Support Teams with an overview and insight into some EQS data showing the variety of occupations, employers and student profiles. The results for a number of specific qualifications were examined in order to help the team who deal with all the enquiries from students on modules linked to these qualifications. EQS data, presented as insight to help understand more about our students, has also been shared in other Student Support Team meetings (both for planning and for strategic management purposes), in Faculty Assemblies, in strategic meetings in the four nations (the OU is the only UK university to have a significant presence in all four nations) and in meetings with the senior management team. The EQS work has been of particular interest to colleagues involved in writing TEF submissions and commentaries. To this end, the EQS results have been presented at several internal TEF meetings, showcasing the data and suggesting ways in which the data can be used.

**Reaching beyond the OU** – Using the EQS data to work with employers has centred on using the survey data as a stepping stone to contact alumni. The Employer Engagement Team, who are part of CES, contacted EQS respondents who had indicated within the survey they were happy for the OU to get back in touch with them. Enlisting employers to act as guest moderators for a student forum were secured in this way. Another piece of work aimed to harness the goodwill of OU alumni as employers to broaden the range of organisations working with CES. It is hoped this will result in more job opportunities being promoted to students and graduates, and will increase the number and variety of employers taking part in online careers events.

One CES colleague uses the data to report impact outside of the OU. The OU receives funds from the Ministry of Justice to support students in secure environments. This colleague leads on supporting these students and uses EQS results as part of their quarterly report to the Ministry of Justice. Without this data, it would not be possible to demonstrate the added value of OU study for students with both career and personal goals.

**Wider uses across the OU** – EQS data has also been used by colleagues from other areas across the university for different purposes. Examples include:

- The Widening Access and Student Success team used data to provide an analysis for the Office for Students on the progression outcomes for widening access and success students.
- The Government and External Affairs team in their conversations with officials at the Treasury about the employment outcomes of OU students.
- The Marketing Acquisition team in email communication campaigns, including a direct mail activity to prospective new students.
- The Marketing Insight team in understanding people’s motivations to study with the OU, specifically to understand similarities and differences by faculty and by subject.
- The Strategic Opportunities and Insight team in preparing the OU’s response to the Augar review. This work centred on looking at the value of our degrees for students who might be excluded in the future if the recommendations are implemented.

- Strategic Analysts when producing ‘Curriculum in numbers’ work for faculty colleagues.

Outside of the OU, the EQS methodology has informed the TEF independent review, led by Dame Shirley Pearce, and has been used to inform AGCAS (the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services) strategy and planning work.

### **Conclusion**

The aims of the EQS were to monitor and inform future careers and employability provision, as well as evaluate the impact of OU study. The survey contained questions on service delivery, motivations, employability, skill development and the perceived value of OU study. It was distributed to students three years after qualification achievement, allowing time for both career and personal development, including the development of opportunity awareness and social capital. The results have proved useful for many purposes and enabled us to act on student feedback, to progress communications with alumni and to report on outcomes for OU students.

Furthermore, the results of the EQS have confirmed our assumption that OU students are unlike other Higher Education students and are motivated by different goals – for example, they view earning potential as less important and personal development as more important than students at other Higher Education Institutions. Knowing this has strengthened our resolve to be “A unique service for a unique student population”.

Awareness and usage of the survey, both within and outside of the careers service, has increased considerably this year, as more colleagues recognise the value of using the data to inform their work, one example being to support TEF documentation. This greater visibility has raised the profile of the survey and enabled strategic links between employability and the student success portfolio at the OU. As insight into impact, the Employability of Qualifiers Survey has indeed enabled us to explore the added value of part-time distance learning study.